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AUTHOR Colvin, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

The determination of a philosophy and specific objectives of college reading are necessary for the organization, administration, testing, diagnosis, instruction, selection and use of materials, and evaluation of college reading programs. A tenable, working definition for a philosophy of college reading includes (1) that every college student can and should improve his reading and study skills to an optimum level for him; (2) that college reading and study involve complex skills which may be developed through instruction and practice; (3) that reading is only one factor, but a very important one, in the total adjustment in which students need specialized assistance; and (4) that specialized attention to reading in college is desirable because of the wide range in reading ability demonstrated by incoming students and the favorable influence of improved reading ability on academic progress. Also, in college reading programs specific statements of objectives are needed and should follow these criteria: (1) the objective should be stated in terms of the student or learner, (2) the objective should be stated in terms of observable behavior, and (3) the statement of an objective should refer to the behavior or process and to the specific intent to which it is to be applied. References are included. (Author/DE)

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PHILOSOPHY AND OBJECTIVES OF COLLEGE READING PROGRAMS

by

Charles R. Colvin
Professor of Education
State University College
Fredonia, New York

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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Introduction

Perhaps one reason why college reading programs have not enjoyed the status and acceptance traditionally afforded speaking and writing programs has been the lack of a guiding theoretical framework of beliefs and principles on college reading. Part I of this paper attempts to develop such a theoretical framework.

Another possible source for the lack of academic acceptance may well be due to the pretentious, sometimes false, claims made by college and adult reading instructors. Because our objectives and goals have been, and continue to be, the promised panaceas for large numbers of the adult, college-age population we have often been found wanting. It is the writer's conviction that carefully thought-out statements of objectives will make us accountable to our clientele, and cause us to examine at length and in depth what we claim about college reading. Part II is thus devoted to the development of statements of objectives.

The point of view of this paper is that organization, administration, testing, diagnosis, methods of instruction, selection and use of materials, and evaluation of college reading programs all flow from a philosophy of college reading and the specifying of objectives.

I. Philosophy of College Reading

From research findings, experience, and common practice, the following underlying beliefs about reading at the college level have evolved:

1. Every college student can and should improve his reading and study skills to optimum level for him. Implicit in this statement is the awareness that "optimum level" can at least be tentatively identified in some way or another, and that of necessity there will be various levels of reading and study skill achievement. In effect, optimum level may differ significantly from one institution to another, from one curriculum to another within an institution, and from one course to another within a particular curriculum. Hence the reading instructor must be knowledgeable about his institution, the curricula in it, and the individual courses students take. In addition, this belief implies that the instructor also has a knowledge of testing and methodology to help the student identify and achieve "optimum level".

2. College reading and study involve complex skills which may be developed through instruction and practice, in much the same way that other communication skills are improved. To this observer, it seems strange that colleges traditionally emphasized the skills of writing and speaking, and until recently almost ignored the skills of reading and listening. What the nature of the "complex skills" is and how these are developed are questions beyond the scope of this paper. In brief, however, we generally refer to such skills as flexibility, comprehension techniques, and learning and

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study strategies, to name just a few. We do not limit ourselves to reading skills only, but almost take for granted the need for attention to listening skills, because of the heavy reliance in colleges today on the lecture method of teaching.

Traditionally, two types of programs evolve from the above belief. The first type looks upon reading as a perceptual and mechanical act in which a group of more or less discrete skills, such as rate, comprehension, and vocabulary are involved. The contention is that training in any of these aspects will bring about improvement in reading. From this observer's view, this mechanistic approach is the least acceptable approach, but one which is popular with many commercial organizations.

The second type of program goes beyond the mechanical, "speed-demon" approach. Its primary emphasis is on providing the student with extended drill on complex reading and study skills, and thus it may be identified as the "skills-drill" approach. Examples of this approach are practice in selecting main ideas, reading for inferences and conclusions, practice in notetaking from lectures and books, outlining texts and other related materials. Today such activities as evaluating mass media, reading programmed texts, and the like fall under the "skills-drill" approach. The laboratory setting, with provisions for both individual and group work, seem to be most effective in achieving the goals of the "skills-drill" approach. Almost all present college programs fall under the "skills-drill" category.

3. Reading is only one factor, but a very important one, in the total adjustment in which students need specialized assistance. This belief is characterized by attempts to identify and change behavioral patterns which are thought to be related, if not responsible, for poor reading and inadequate study skills. Reading difficulty is assumed to be a symptom of a greater personality problem which must be treated first. In fact, reading may be given secondary treatment; that is, it may be looked upon as a crucial means to an end.

The most difficult of all programs to implement because of its costs, demands for specialized personnel and other resources, this psychologically-oriented approach is often discussed by experienced college reading workers, but, from this observer's view, seldom found. Regardless, the obvious implications of cause and effect of reading to personality and personality to reading cannot be ignored. Problems of concentration, attitudes toward studies, tenseness and "freezing" on exams, inability to organize, inability to schedule and budget time are just a few of the problems to which any experienced college reading instructor can attest.

4. Specialized attention to reading in college is desirable because of the wide range in reading ability demonstrated by incoming students, and the favorable influence of improved reading ability on academic progress. In 1900, about one out of every twenty high school graduates attempted post-secondary education, today, the proportion is one out of every three. With increasing opportunity for some form of higher education, it is obvious that incoming students will demonstrate a wide range of reading ability, and that steps must be taken to help at least the "below-average" and "average", if not also the "above-average" to read and study adequately at the college level. Note the emphasis on the college level as opposed to successful high school reading. Wide ranges in reading ability affirm the belief that reading is a continuous, developmental process, not one restricted to adequate skill in lower forms of education only. The basic idea is reflected in the complaints often voiced by college instructors: "I can't understand why college students have trouble reading this textbook; how did they ever get out of high school?" (Would that more instructors take the time to find

out why their students have trouble reading texts!) The range of reading ability on tests indicates the need for remedial reading for the few and developmental reading for the many.

The belief that improved reading ability will lead to improved academic performance is probably the foundation belief for all college programs. In the verbal college world, reading is the essential tool to success in the classroom. The relationship of improvement in reading performance to improved grades is a valid question all college workers must ask of their individual programs. If the majority of students do not receive "better" grades sometime after demonstrating improved reading performance, there would seem to be little reason to continue the program. Perhaps one of the classic studies demonstrating the relation of reading improvement to college grades is that of Smith and Wood (1), a study worthy of a total reading in its original form.

The above four beliefs about reading at the college level can be supported by research, experience, and practice. Although the writer hesitates to use the term "principles", he does feel that these four statements give a tenable, working definition for a philosophy of reading at the college level. The writer also feels that this philosophy has universal application in the sense that no distinction need be made as to the kind, type, control, or level of the institution. In effect, this means that a two-year institution need not have a separate or different philosophy of reading than that found in a four-year institution. Differences in implementation, degree, and kind may occur, but only within the context of the four beliefs delineated in this paper. Phrased another way: the philosophy of college reading is everywhere the same, the objectives of each program may, however, differ according to differences in students, curriculums, and institutions.

Before going to the next phase of our topic, namely objectives, would you please review all four "principles" to see how they apply to your program?

It is relatively easy to relate all four beliefs to your reading program. But it is quite another task to take these beliefs and transcribe them to action, to establish the how, when, what, who, and where of college programs. Knowing the why of a program only means that our task is underway and that we have some guiding principles to help us get at the crucial task of translating a belief into an objective and eventually a practice.

II. Objectives of College Reading

The point of view of this part of the paper is best demonstrated by the following quotation: "The majority of educational objectives are fundamentally fraudulent. They have the capacity to deceive both those expressing them and those to whom they are expressed. They may be used to camouflage our confusion and to propagandize the public." (2)

Consider, for a moment, the following statements of objectives related to college and adult reading improvement:

1. To improve the academic performance of students through training in reading.
2. To increase reading rate, comprehension, and vocabulary.
3. To improve the students' study techniques.
4. To change behavior patterns thought to be responsible for inadequate reading and study skills.
5. To help a person become well-rounded academically, socially, and psychologically.

Randomly pursue descriptions of college-adult programs and you will find one or more of the above objectives listed and stated in similar terms. On the surface, who can quibble with any of them? Academic improvement, skill gains, and behavior changes are, as we have just seen in our discussion of philosophy, all valid goals of instruction. But a closer look at just one of the statements - academic gains - raises some interesting questions. Can and should it be proven that students' academic performances are improved as a result of training in reading? If so, how much? When? Now, or five semesters from now? What factors other than reading may lead to academic improvement? Are all students going to improve or just a select few? How much? How will we know when academic improvement takes place? Can it be measured in some way? Can we define "academic improvement" and "reading training" adequately enough to recognize when either occurs? Can we really carry out the activities necessary to make the improvement occur? Is it worth doing even if we have tons of resources to do it? Under what conditions will improvement occur, and not occur?

A host of questions may also be raised about the other four statements in the list.

What do we learn from an analysis of a statement of objectives? First of all, even though we included "favorable influence of improved reading ability on academic progress" as one of our beliefs about college reading, we have no assurance that by stating such a belief as an objective we really know what we are doing with a particular group of students in a particular program at a particular time in a particular way. Objectives ought to help us point the direction to a principle or belief, and not be equated with the belief itself. Otherwise, it seems, we can state just about anything we please, clothe it in attractive language, and claim that virtually any activity will bring about its fulfillment or completion. At the very least, "an objective must represent some point or event that is identifiable."(3)

For example: "Given the following set of conditions, selected reading students who complete the following activities in identifying details from a freshman history text, will be able to distinguish details from main ideas on said text 80% of the time." Of course, the conditions and activities must then be set down, otherwise there is no possible way for us to determine when the objective has been attained. Most important of all, by specifying the conditions, the basis for selecting students, the necessary activities, the degree of correctness sought, and the exact skill we hope to develop, we are affirming our intention to achieve the objective. We really mean it. We are serious about bringing about some change which will have a bearing on our belief that academic performance can be improved by training in reading.

What criteria can we use as guides to help us avoid the vagueness, blandness, fraudulence, and deception of such statements of objectives as the five listed above? Virtually all current textbooks on tests and measurements give all kinds of helpful advice. Lindvall (4), for example, offers three criteria.

1. The objective should be stated in terms of the pupil.
2. The objective should be stated in terms of observable behavior.
3. The statement of an objective should refer to the behavior or process and to the specific content to which this is to be applied.

Because the writer attaches great importance to an understanding of these criteria in stating objectives, further explanation, with examples, is in order.

1. State the objective in terms of the student or learner. This simple procedure makes the instructor aware of his responsibility as the agent to bring about certain changes in the learner. It is useful in identifying the audience so that we know who is doing the learning. Not "The instructor will. . .", but rather "Students who fail to select main ideas from supporting details on a series of exercises will. . .". The audience is now unmistakably identified.

2. The objective should be stated in terms of observable behavior. Can the learner display or demonstrate in some way the change that we are seeking? What are the specific behaviors we are looking for? Is there a possible way to evaluate the behavior we are promoting? Not "Student who, etc., will see the difference between details and main ideas", but "Students who, etc., will identify or distinguish, or demonstrate the ability to select the main ideas from supporting details on certain exercises." Action verbs that identify the behavior serve best in this stage of the process. They enable us to identify instructional activities that can be observed and evaluated. Equally important is the realization that students will also know what behaviors they are working toward.

3. The statement of an objective should refer to the behavior or process and to the specific content to which this is to be applied. The objective "The student will be able to read textbooks successfully" is obviously not specific. It tells us what the process is, i.e., reading, but not what the specific content is. Nor do we know from this objective under what conditions "successful textbook reading" is to take place. Finally, such a bland objective as the above gives us no clue as to the degree of attainment we expect of the student. Are all texts to be read with total comprehension? What is "successful textbook reading?" Are all students to show the same degree of mastery?

Note how the following statement informs the instructor and the instructed of where they are both headed: "Given a conventional chapter from a freshman world civilization textbook, students who fail to select main ideas from supporting details with 60% accuracy will, after two weeks training, distinguish with 80% accuracy the main ideas from supporting details on said textbook." Now we have a criterion, an observable process, specific content, the conditions under which the behavior is to take place, and a known degree of accuracy. If successful textbook reading is necessary for attaining academic improvement, then the above specific objective gives us one means to achieve such a praiseworthy goal. Furthermore, such a specific statement of an objective relates to the broad goal of "improving the academic performance of students through training in reading" and to the four beliefs we developed under the philosophy of college reading.

Reading instructors, like all other instructors, can develop excuses and rationalizations for not going through the process of developing specific statements of objectives. But from this writer's point of view, real, worthwhile progress in the field of college reading depends upon each of us writing specific objectives adapted to the needs and types of programs we conduct. Testing, methods of instruction, materials, and evaluation all flow from our success with objectives.

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